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[Op-Ed]

By Rep. Anna Eshoo

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Not long ago, mass arrests and secret detentions were things we criticized other countries for doing. Open, democratic governments with appropriate checks and balances were the prescription we offered the world's less developed and dictatorial nations. But that ethos -- and all the achievements it has led to -- has now been pushed aside. Instead of preaching hope, too often the United States seems to be peddling fear.

This month, the Supreme Court refused to reconsider a lower court ruling that said the government isn't obligated to release the names and circumstances under which hundreds of people were rounded up and secretly held in detention after the Sept. 11 attacks. Although the vast majority were not charged with anything other than immigration violations, the court decided that releasing any information would compromise the war on terror.

Two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson warned Americans against concentrating too much power in the hands of a select few. "In matters of power," he said, "let no more be heard of confidence in men, but bind him down from mischief by the chains of the Constitution." These days, however, it seems our government is breaking those chains and essentially telling the American people to "just trust us."

Sadly, the court decision highlights the standard operating procedure for what is the most secretive administration in modern history. Consider this:

Vice President Cheney has refused to release the names of outside advisers who were charged with drafting an energy policy for our nation. A lawsuit demanding he do so is going before the Supreme Court.

President Bush adamantly opposed the formation of an independent commission to review the Sept. 11 attacks. Our nation's understanding of similar events, like the bombing of Pearl Harbor, benefited greatly from such reviews and can help us prevent future attacks.

Despite loud and repeated claims of the urgent threat from Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, Secretary of State Colin Powell now admits that there never was a "smoking gun." To date, the weapons have still not been found, yet the administration argues against any inquiry into whether intelligence on Iraq was either inadequate or skewed for political purposes. The administration drags its feet investigating who leaked the name of a covert CIA officer to the media -- an incident which threatened not only her life and the work of our intelligence agencies, but the lives of her colleagues as well. But when former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill went public with his criticisms of the administration, it took just one day for the White House to call for an investigation. These are the decisions of an administration more afraid of criticism

and second-guessing than with strengthening American democracy. As a member of the House Intelligence Committee, I have the responsibility to work to turn back these trends toward secrecy and distrust. Over the past year, the committee has held rare and important public hearings to examine the intelligence community and the information that led us to war in Iraq. Our purpose isn't to point fingers, but to ensure that we're getting the most accurate and thorough intelligence possible and that the American people understand how their government's decisions are reached. The worst provisions of the Patriot Act should be repealed, including those that force libraries to disclose reading preferences and which allow law enforcement officers to detain legal residents and legal immigrants without probable cause. The executive order that allows monitoring of private attorney-client conversations, a basic touchstone of our legal system, should be overturned as well. I agree with the president when he says that the war on terror is as important for us to win as the Cold War and World War II. But to do so, we must trust our citizens with information about how that war is being fought. Another President, Abraham Lincoln, once reflected on how the nation should emerge from the horrors of war stronger and more committed to its original principles, ensuring ``that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth." Though many things have changed since Sept. 11, his wisdom and guidance remain timeless.